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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20505

OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

15 March 1973

MEMORANDUM FOR: Dr. Henry A. Kissinger  
Assistant to the President for  
National Security Affairs

SUBJECT : Request for Authorization to Fly SR-71  
Photographic Reconnaissance Missions  
over North Vietnam

I. THE NEED

1. As you are aware, the current restrictions on overflights of North Vietnam have precluded the collection of direct evidence -- aerial photography -- on military deliveries to North Vietnam from the USSR and the People's Republic of China. The need for photographic coverage of major military areas of North Vietnam is critical if the intelligence community is to meet its responsibility for monitoring North Vietnam's military intentions as reflected by its materiel capabilities.

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2. Given the above, the intelligence community's ability to provide documented analyses of North Vietnam's logistics capabilities has been sharply curtailed. We have drawn certain presumptive conclusions based on past experience and observations of trends of logistics movements out of North Vietnam through Laos

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and Cambodia. Traditionally, Hanoi has practiced a very conservative materiel policy, both in the north and the south, and has maintained very large stockpiles in rear areas. As large amounts of supplies have continued to move out of North Vietnam during the recent past, one can reasonably infer that these supplies have, at a minimum, been replaced in kind by Hanoi's prime suppliers. It is not currently possible, however, to quantify this resupply effort in any meaningful terms. Nor can we guarantee that our inferential analysis -- no matter how impeccable its internal logic -- squares with the facts of current North Vietnamese behavior in the logistic area.

3. Our only practical way of detecting and assessing military aid shipments crossing the North Vietnamese border from China is from aerial reconnaissance. The past seven years have demonstrated beyond argument that no other source as reliable exists. Photographic coverage of major lines of communication and associated storage depots leading from the northeastern North Vietnamese border into Hanoi and from Vinh south to the DMZ would provide clues to current levels of military transport and stockpiling activity directed toward South Vietnam and Laos. It would also offer the opportunity of detecting military equipment which may have already been shipped across the Chinese border since late January. Without the fruits of such reconnaissance, we are operating very much in the dark, since no imagery of any value has been collected over North Vietnam for nearly two months (i.e., since 23 January).

## II. THE REQUEST

4. The GIANT SCALE (SR-71) reconnaissance system is the only airborne platform that can penetrate North Vietnamese airspace to cover the required territory with reasonable safety, though its passage would of course be detected by the North Vietnamese.

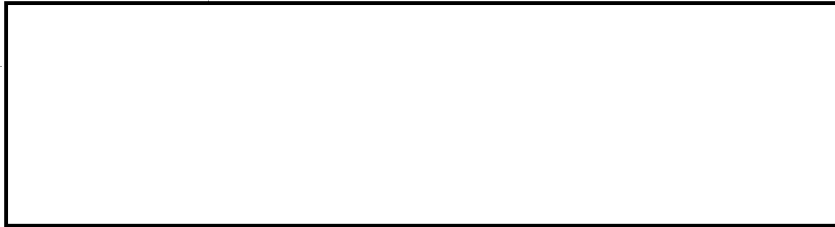
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b. The IDEALIST mission we have requested would supplement an SR-71 overflight product but could not substitute for it. As you know, the IDEALIST proposal involves one mission flown exclusively in the Gulf of Tonkin by a U-2 aircraft equipped with an H-Camera. This camera should give far better oblique coverage of the coastal areas of North Vietnam than we have been able to obtain with any other system used offshore since 28 January. If the H-Camera system works as well as we have reason to anticipate, it should provide better photography than we now possess of activity in the rail/road/waterway net that runs near or along North Vietnam's coast. However, even if the H-Camera's product should exceed our fondest hopes in the Vietnamese environment, its limited range precludes coverage of the rail/road entry points along the China border or of land route activity between that border and Hanoi.

5. Given the above, overhead flights with SR-71 aircraft are necessary to provide the early evidence the intelligence community needs to meet the President's requirements. More specifically:

a. To cover the essential targets (outlined in paragraph 9 below) would require two "complete" SR-71 missions. "Complete" in this context means a mission which covers all of the targets on its track without any significant proportion of these targets being masked by cloud cover.

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b. The current time frame (mid-March-mid-April) is a period in North Vietnam characterized by persistent overcast with fog and few sunny days, i.e., a bad period for aerial reconnaissance over North Vietnam. Furthermore, weather apart, there is no guarantee that all the photography taken on a given single mission will be of uniform quality. Here again, experience suggests that on any given mission, some of the coverage (for technical reasons) will probably be of minimal utility.

c. Given the above, though the essential targets could all be covered (once) in two "complete" missions, the odds are that -- given weather and technical problems -- it would take up to five missions to get complete, useable results from the equivalent of two.

d. Finally, one time coverage (i.e., complete coverage of each target once) would, at best, give us a freeze "snapshot" of the situation at one given (somewhat arbitrary) moment in time. It would help develop a now missing baseline of current behavior which could then be compared to observed patterns of pre-23 January behavior. It would not show much on current trends.

6. Actual Request. In light of the above, we are requesting authorization for the following:

a. A package of up to five SR-71 reconnaissance overflights of North Vietnam with the understanding that no more than the flights required to produce two "complete" missions will actually be flown.

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b. Permission to fly a similar package (of up to five flights) approximately two weeks after the first package is flown, with the targets and tracks of the second package to be developed after we have assessed the results of the first SR-71 package. the IDEALIST mission [REDACTED]

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### III. TIMING

7. From the analysts' and intelligence community's parochial point of view, obviously the sooner the needed GIANT SCALE missions are flown the better. The final decision on timing, however, clearly involves matters going beyond our parochial concerns. Until such flights are flown, we will lack hard evidence on current patterns of logistic behavior within North Vietnam, particularly evidence related to the current state of overland military imports. You are in a better position than we to calculate the urgency of the President's need for answers to his, and your, detailed questions in this area. On timing, however, at least two considerations are relevant in light of the fact that any SR-71 overflights of North Vietnam will be tracked by North Vietnamese radar and will produce sonic booms that at least some people on the ground will hear:

a. If the North Vietnamese are casting about for a reason to delay the return of the final group of prisoners scheduled to be released by 28 March, a GIANT SCALE overflight before that date would give the DRV a "provocation" or "violation" to protest.

b. Conversely, if the President is looking for signals through which he can emphasize his mounting irritation at Hanoi's overall behavior pattern since 28 January, a GIANT SCALE overflight could be employed as such a signal.

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8. In sum, if this overflight request is approved in principle, we leave entirely to your discretion whether you want the initial mission flown on the first feasible weather day -- even if that day were to come prior to 28 March -- or on the first feasible weather day after 28 March.

#### IV. SPECIFIC TARGETS

9. If this request is approved, we would plan to cover the following key targets, in descending order of priority:

a. The Dong Dang - Ping-hsiang Railyards -- the principal staging areas for military supplies entering North Vietnam.

b. The rail line and Highway Routes 1A, 15/101 between Thanh Hoa and DMZ -- major LOCs and associated large storage depots used for transport of troops and military supplies to South Vietnam. A track covering these would also provide coverage of coastal port activity at Vinh, Quang Khe and Dong Hoi, and lastly, coverage of several key airfields.

c. The Hanoi-Dong Dang Rail Line -- past missions revealed levels of activity and, on one occasion, initial evidence of the SA-3's deployment into North Vietnam.

d. The Kep-Thai Nguyen-Hanoi Rail Line -- this line presumably has carried the bulk of military equipment from the Kep junction rather than the Kep-Hanoi segment. The railyards and large military depots associated with the K-TN-H line have shown significant military stockpiling.

e. The Hanoi-Thanh Hoa Rail Line -- principal supply route for supplies moving south of Hanoi into panhandle.

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10. Since the activity at Dong Dang and Ping-hsiang is the most important question at this time, any SR-71 mission would be programmed to optimize coverage of this area even to the point of sacrificing possible coverage of other nearby targets. Based on past experience, inclusion of other targets within the same pass reduces the chances of effective coverage of Dong Dang/Ping-hsiang. Other critical targets, including railroads northeast of Hanoi and the panhandle, would require additional passes on the same or subsequent missions.

/s/ George A. Carver, Jr.  
(for) James R. Schlesinger  
Director

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Copy No. 3 - Vice Admiral de Poix  
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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20505

OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

15 March 1973

MEMORANDUM FOR: Dr. Henry A. Kissinger  
Assistant to the President  
for National Security Affairs

SUBJECT : Transmittal of Requested Request

1. Attached is the request for authorization of SR-71 overflights of North Vietnam which you asked me to have prepared at the 13 March WSAG meeting.

2. This paper has four sections:

- I The Need
- II The Actual Request
- III Timing
- IV Specific Targets

3. What we are actually requesting, for reasons set forth in the paper, is authorization to:

a. Obtain the take of two complete mission equivalents, which may mean flying up to five missions against the total target mix described.

b. A repeat package (to establish current behavior trends) to be flown approximately two weeks after the first package is completed.

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4. Timing, basically, is your option. It hinges on a political decision, not intelligence judgments. For your information, an SR-71 mission can be launched 24 hours after approval is given. What this actually means in practical terms, however, is that a mission can/will be launched on the first day the weather is feasible following a 24-hour lag after Washington approval is given. At this time of year, the North Vietnam weather for any given day is almost impossible to predict in advance. We might be lucky the day after approval or might have to sit for up to a week or so waiting for the weather to break.

5. To meet your deadline, I have short circuited normal procedures, but all appropriate bases have been touched. The attached proposal was prepared within CIA but has been blessed by COMIREX and concurred in by DIA's Directorate for Collection and Surveillance plus Admiral de Poix, the Director of DIA.

6. I defer to you on where we go from here. At this stage, you are this paper's only recipient (though the Chairman of COMIREX and Admiral de Poix of course each has a copy). I will do whatever you direct be done, e.g.:

(1) Arrange for appropriate operational orders to be issued;

(2) Distribute the request to the other WSAG principles and/or 40 Committee members;

(3) Nothing, until further instructed.

[Redacted]  
George A. Carver, Jr.

Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs

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Attachment  
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Copy No. 1 - Dr. Kissinger  
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